

## BERLINALE 2020: COMPETITION (2/3)



***Never Rarely Sometimes Always*** by Eliza Hittman was one of those rare transformative experiences: an invitation to look at something everyday through a very different pair of eyes. This is one of those beautiful times when you walk into the cinema not really knowing what to expect, and leave feeling that you've really seen something remarkable. The 'female gaze': the buzz words have reached our ears several times before, but with a century's contributions making the male gaze the norm in cinema, how many of us are really able to grasp the concept?

When some people attending the festival very inaccurately described it as 'the new ***Juno***', no one was really sold. It was only after the screening that many realised that the film had had its world premiere in Sundance a month before Berlin: and there's a reason the Berlinale programming team insisted in having it in its main competition anyway. There's also a very good reason the film took home Berlin's second most prestigious award, the Silver Bear Grand Jury Prize.

Eliza Hittman's directing all but forbids passive onlooking; indeed it demands engagement from her viewers, and creates the most fertile ground for it to happen. Non-actor Sidney Flanagan carries the film on her shoulders remarkably well as lead Autumn, though it is undeniably the sensitivity and accuracy in the writing that propels the film forward. Timely matters such as the legality of and misinformation on abortion, gender (in)equality, and a

raw portrayal of the many problems with patriarchy across generations are all explored with unrestrained vigour and unprecedented steadfastness. What might have otherwise been a black-and-white, overdramatized portrayal of a grim, patriarchal society is presented in a more nuanced manner, where Hittman explores the importance of sisterhood through Autumn's relationship with her cousin Skylar (Talia Ryder), and challenges our preconceptions of the power dynamics between genders when a young man (Théodore Pellerin) shows an interest in Skylar. Flanagan's performance may not be impeccable, but make no mistake: she will break your heart a little, the moment when that cryptic title is finally explained.

Speaking of cryptic titles, Hong Sang-soo's ***The Woman Who Ran*** probably takes the cake. It can feel intimidating walking into a film by one of cinema's most acclaimed directors, whilst unfamiliar with the impressive bulk of their previous work. Yet, through a kind of Rohmerian reverie, Hong Sang-soo's exploration of the everyday lulls the audience into a space of safety and familiarity, with his unabashed sense of humour, the playful camera and music (written by himself), and a *very* memorable cat sequence making the film as accessible as they come.

In its very snappy running time of just 77 minutes, ***The Woman Who Ran*** gives us a day (or three) in the life of seemingly happily-married Gam-hee (Kim Min-hee), as she wanders around doing carefree things. The narrative follows a three-act structure, where Gam-hee spends time conversing (and grabbing a bite) with a woman of different marital status every time: she visits a divorced friend for a hearty barbecue; catches up with an unmarried friend over lunch; and finally shares an apple with the wife of a former boyfriend after a trip to the cinema he owns. The film is a series of catch-up sessions, where the clumsy, endearing dialogue of everyday life is captured intimately by a sequence of full-shots, simple pans, and zooms into mid-shots of the characters.

It is 'the first time in 5 years' that Gam-hee and her husband are apart, as he's away on a business trip: this information is conveyed once in every part of the triptych. 'He says people in love should always stick together. It's what he wants', she tells the other women repeatedly. And it's only through these fleeting comments, in an otherwise hilarious and almost inconsequential exchange of words, that we suspect that Gam-hee might actually be running away from something – and yet she does so calmly, inconspicuously. To quote Gam-hee's own impression of the film she watches at the cinema (#meta), *this is a very peaceful film*.

Hong Sang-soo winning Best Director in Competition makes this an impressive winning streak for South Korean cinema this year, following Bong Joon Ho's historic success with ***Parasite***. ***The Woman Who Ran*** is a film of a more subtle charm and beauty, but it is nonetheless a small treasure to behold.



It would be hard to say the same for the D'Innocenzo brothers' Berlinale comeback, ***Favolacce***. Two years after their first feature, ***La Terra dell'Abbastanza***, premiered in the Panorama section, twins Damiano and Fabio return for a similarly grim look at modern suburban Italian tragedies.

Despite the obvious effort put into making the film visually attractive, the film seems to lack any sort of empathy towards any of the characters it's concerned with. A narrator introduces us to the intertwined lives of the families in the story through the diary of a mystery child, which we later identify as one of the protagonists in the ensemble cast. However, her angle in the story does not appear to be any more important than anyone else's, which makes for an incoherent shift in perspectives throughout the film. The viewer takes on an omniscient standpoint, with the camera following the drama of the different families in turns.

Despite some good moments in the script, the narrative doesn't quite come together in the end. In fact, the narrator concludes by admitting it was his own boredom that probably made him retell these bad tales. Unlike analogous works by Iñárritu, where lives are tied by the poetic through

some unexpected twists of fate, the characters in **Favolacce** are just neighbours or acquaintances with one thing in common: shitty parents in the household. There are occasionally some moments of daring filmmaking, but they become diluted in 100 minutes lacking both a clear focus and any believable performances. Yes, some children's lives are horrible – but the film could have done a lot more with that theme. Why the film won Silver Bear for Best Screenplay will remain one of those Berlinale mysteries for us.

A pleasant surprise, on the other hand, was that Benoît Delépine and Gustave Kervern's **Delete History** was awarded the Silver Bear 70<sup>th</sup> Berlinale prize (formerly known as Alfred Bauer Prize). They say it's very hard to write a good comedy. Comedies that don't even slightly fit into the drama genre are very rarely included in competition at big festivals, much less awarded one of the top prizes. If **Delete History** does one thing, it's that it restores our faith in humorous narratives altogether.

From beginning to end, the script is densely packed with modern-day satire that is as hilarious as it is unforgiving. Be warned: this film was *not* awarded for its subtlety. If anyone asks for the definition of slapstick humour, this is it. The whole experience has the rhythm of a stand-up comedy: before the last laugh in the audience dies out, a new witty response comes from the comedians.

Marie (Blanche Gardin), Bertrand (Denis Podalydès), and Christine (Corinne Masiero) form a trio of misfits, whose clumsy series of unfortunate life decisions make for a very enjoyable watch. Marie is the broke, recently divorced mother in denial of the fact that her son is no longer living with her; Bertrand is her neighbour, a single father who seems to ignore his teenage daughter to talk to a phone operator for a subscription service he clearly doesn't need; and Christine is the driver they both call when they realise they need to keep their mileage low enough so they can sell their cars at a higher price. When a stranger very casually blackmails Marie that he'll leak their sex tape online, the trio embarks on a most unlikely adventure with the most overt, over-the-top satire of consumerism you're likely to see on the big screen.

Despite some potential issues viewers might have with its portrayal of the working class, we would be slightly disappointed if the film didn't become an international hit. We urge you to go see it: this one's a crowd-pleaser.

That's more than we can say about Tsai Ming-Liang's most recent oeuvre, **Days**. Not much happens in terms of plot, quite honestly. One moment

you're watching someone peel a huge cucumber for two minutes, and then there's a massage scene that lasts at least fifteen. But somewhere between that, all the magic happens. A series of still frames make up the majority of the film: at times they capture the mundane, at others they capture the magnificent; and then they effortlessly blur the lines between the two.

Street markets in Taiwan, the reflection of a beautiful sunrise on an otherwise monotonous building, and a lonely man playing with a music box – all in the midst of a busy city, too hectic to notice any of it. And yet we do notice: the juxtaposition between the slowness imposed on us by the director, and the fast pace of everything surrounding the two male protagonists is nothing short of poetic.

**Days** was not everyone's cup of tea in Berlin: no one hated it, but not many particularly loved it. 'An intentionally unsubtitled film', as the opening sequence bluntly points out, **Days** is a 2-hour watch with *no dialogue whatsoever*. And while many might run away because of that, we hope that many more will decide to embrace it as the beautiful meditative piece that it is: on the universal themes of aging and loneliness – but also, crucially, on the fleeting, ephemeral nature of human connection. And although the team at A Cuarta Pareda didn't manage to watch a significant number of the other LGBTQ films at the festival, we feel happy that this slow, tender film, easy to overlook, was given a bit more attention after it was awarded the Teddy Jury Award.

